

VZCZCXRO1167
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #1455/01 2821100
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 081100Z OCT 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3235
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3010
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3221
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001455

SIPDIS

DEPT FORNEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK, PDA WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/05/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH DAS HALE, GEAGEA WORRIED ABOUT
SYRIAN TROOPS AT BORDER

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) On October 4, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea expressed his concern to visiting NEA DAS David Hale that the Syrian troops currently deployed at the northern border with Lebanon planned to invade northern Lebanon under the pretext of fighting terrorism. Downplaying the terrorist threat, Geagea explained that recent clashes between Alawites and Sunnis in the north are "containable." Geagea hinted that Fatah al-Islam was behind the September 29 bus explosion in Tripoli that killed several Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) soldiers, and argued that LAF G-2 should investigate who was responsible for the string of attacks against the LAF. Believing President Michel Sleiman supportive of March 14 principles, but vulnerable to Syrian influence, Geagea urged the U.S. to "regularly push Sleiman in the right direction." Geagea blamed Christian rival Suleiman Franjieh for stalling Christian reconciliation efforts, claiming that Franjieh insisted his ally Michel Aoun participate in the reconciliation, a demand Geagea rejected. DAS Hale assured Geagea that the international community would remain focused on Lebanon and tough on Syria And that the U.S.'s policy in support of Lebanon has not changed. End summary.

MINIMIZES TERRORIST THREAT
IN NORTHERN LEBANON

2. (C) Visiting NEA DAS David Hale and the Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea at his residence in Maarab on October 4. Geagea advisors Elie Khoury and Joseph Nehme also attended the meeting. Geagea implied that Fatah al-Islam was behind the September 29 bus explosion in Tripoli that killed six and appeared to target the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). The LAF G-2 (intelligence branch) should be responsible for investigating these attacks, he said, adding that the G-2 could benefit from U.S. assistance. Hale said that the U.S. supports the LAF and the Internal Security Forces, and agreed that supporting the LAF's intelligence branch is also important.

3. (C) Geagea explained the sporadic clashes between Alawites and Sunnis that have plagued northern Lebanon since May as "overreactions to normal incidents," stemming from a Sunni feeling of vulnerability following the May clashes in Beirut.

The Alawite - Sunni tensions are separate from the string of attacks against the LAF, he suggested, and can be contained.

14. (C) Presenting a paper analyzing Syrian President Bashar Asad's reaction to the recent attack against the LAF, Geagea refuted Asad's claim that northern Lebanon is "a base for extremism." Geagea clarified, "Salafists are not jihadists -- they do not use violence to achieve their goals. Fatah al-Islam members are jihadists." He accused Asad of trying to depict northern Lebanon as a hotbed for terrorists to justify its troop buildup on the northern Lebanese-Syrian border. Geagea said the deployment of what he believed to be between 8,000 and 10,000 troops is to intimidate the Lebanese.

HALE: NO CHANGE IN U.S. POLICY ON LEBANON

15. (C) While Geagea does not anticipate a full-fledged Syrian invasion in Lebanon, he predicted that Syria will push the limits, for example, by crossing into northern Lebanon "in hot pursuit" of terrorists. He expressed his hope that the U.S. "do something hard" if Syrian troops crossed into Lebanon. Agreeing that Syria seemed to be using intimidation tactics, Hale assured Geagea that the international community would remain focused on Lebanon and tough on Syria. He stressed that there will be no compromises made on Lebanon and that the U.S. policy in support of Lebanon has not changed.

SLEIMAN NEEDS

BEIRUT 00001455 002 OF 002

U.S. GUIDANCE

16. (C) Addressing President Michel Sleiman's September trip to the U.S., Geagea called Sleiman a "modest, straightforward man who shares March 14 values." Geagea pointed out that Sleiman does not represent a strong political party with a large support base, and therefore, "He can lean a bit to the 'other' side. It is important for the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to push Sleiman in the right direction."

17. (C) Geagea called Sleiman's advisors, Nazem Khoury and Ambassador Naji Abi Assi, "good," but qualified that they are "weak and lend an ear to Hizballah." It would be wise, he continued, for the U.S. to communicate with Sleiman "regularly, bluntly, and privately." Hale responded that the U.S. was pleased to have a Lebanese president with whom the U.S. can work.

ACCUSES FRANJIEH OF
STALLING RECONCILIATION

18. (C) Geagea reported that his efforts at Christian reconciliation, following his September 21 rally and public apology, were being stymied by former minister and MP and Christian rival Suleiman Franjeh. According to Geagea, Franjeh insisted that the reconciliation talks include his ally, Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun. Scoffing, Geagea reported that he refused the request, saying, "Even Aoun does not want to be there!" He suspected that Franjeh requested Aoun's presence to ensure there would be "another heavyweight" in the room.

19. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.
SISON